

A Ghostly Encounter by **PlaidDino**

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Summary: An AU of Season 2, episode 2. The boys (and Max) go Trick-Or-Treating on Halloween, but these Ghostbusters find themselves being followed by someone in a ghost costume. Three-shot.

1. Part One: Static

Trick-Or-Treating this year had been turning sour for Mike very quickly. Not only did he and his gang receive a mixed level of annoying reactions to their costumes ranging from "How cute!" to "Aren't you boys getting a little old for this?", but then there was that girl Max that just *had* to show up and ruin everything. Now Lucas and Dustin were falling all over themselves and acting weird, and they were completely ignoring him and Will.

This was supposed to be for *their* party. If Max was going to split up the group like this, then she wasn't welcome as far as Mike was concerned. She wouldn't understand them; she was just some new girl. Sure, a girl who rode a skateboard and played video games, but even so, she still clearly thought of them as losers, just like any other girls at school. And more importantly, she wasn't there with them *last year*. And she would never understand them because she wasn't there for anything they went through. She didn't know why Will was called "Zombie Boy". She hadn't been through anything that they had gone through. That they went through together.

And *another thing*. Another thing that bugged Mike about Max coming with them more than anything else:

How come it's okay for them to act like idiots around this new girl, when they were giving him a hard time last year for - well... okay. He doesn't feel as embarrassed to admit it anymore. Not after a whole year of separation.

How come it's okay for them to act like idiots around some girl now, when they made fun of him for liking El?

If they thought Max would ever be a replacement for El just because she goes to school and plays video games, they were dead wrong. And they better not think Max somehow better than her. Because she clearly is *not*.

Anyway, the last "Aren't you too old for this" comment was starting to get to Mike. Because, well, after the nightmares that him and his gang had been through, he was starting to feel completely different

from how he used to be. Especially with the gaping hole inside him that made him realize that Eleven had taken a part of him that couldn't ever be his alone ever again. Not without her. And he didn't even know if she was still out there. He really wanted to believe she was alive. And he would keep holding on to that, even if she wasn't, just to keep his sanity. It was kind of counter-intuitive, keeping his hopes up even though a part of him was finally realizing that she probably wasn't going to come back. And he was bitter over that loss. He missed the part of him that she took with her. He missed *her*. He felt like a shell. He found himself wondering what the point of everything was. Life wasn't as interesting. It was dull, pointless. He didn't know what he was even doing anymore. His grades were dropping. He was misbehaving at school, because he didn't care as much. Admittedly, he did still care a little... but what was the point of all those grades anyway?

And why was Trick-Or-Treating simply not as fun anymore? The excitement was faded, and the mystery was gone. They all knew that greater, more mysterious - more sinister - things lay deep in the forest, so everything simply lost its thrill. There was some fun in dressing up as the Ghostbusters, though. A warm glimmer lit up in Mike's cavernous heart as he remembered how the movie made him forget things for a short while inside that theatre. His reality melted away with the humor and excitement of the film, and he found himself wishing he could be in that world for a while, if not forever.

That's why he still wanted this night to be good. He wanted to have fun and forget his feelings, and just pretend to be some other gang for a while. A gang that better things happen to. But then Max showed up and made his lonely reality come crashing back.

Mike watched as Lucas and Dustin chat away to Max, not-so-subtly trying to one-up each other, while Will walked beside him with the video camera. Well, at least he had Will. So he wasn't a complete third wheel. And he wanted Will to have a day to enjoy himself apart from his own stresses as well, so he tried to suck up his irritations.

As they walked along a road to go to another section of the neighborhood though, Will suddenly turned his camera towards the woods that they were traveling right beside. "Hey, what's that?" Will commented, and Mike's gaze followed the direction of the camera. He

felt his stomach jolt for a second as he saw something white standing far into the forest. Then he realized it was a Trick-Or-Treater. Probably some kid trying to scare people. They were standing stock-still, the large circles for the eyes looking like dark, ghostly eyes from far away, just staring at the two boys. Dustin, Lucas, and Max had kept walking without them.

"I bet they're just trying to scare us." Mike said, rolling his eyes a little. But he couldn't help but feel fascinated, even though his common sense told him to keep walking. Will had kept his camera on the ghostly figure, but he was peering over it with fear and curiosity.

Mike smirked a little, and grabbed his wand from his proton pack and waved it toward the ghost. "You better watch out! We got a call about you!" He called.

"Mike, don't." Will said quietly, unease dripping in his voice. "Let's just go."

The kid just stood there. Then they took several steps closer. Then they started walking - no, STRIDING toward them. Quickly. Reaching their arms out. Towards Mike.

Will didn't wait to see what would happen if they stayed put. He seemed to already be bracing to be messed with. "Mike. Mike... Come on." He urged, already starting to move again and looking back towards Mike.

"Right." Mike muttered, shooting an anxious glare at the ghost one more time before speeding along after Will, a small amount of fear gripping him at the thought of how the ghost seemed to be coming with pure determination towards him. They strode into a fast walk, realizing that the others were way ahead of them by now, and they needed to catch up. Irritation returned to poke Mike's mind when he silently hoped that the rest of their gang stopped to wait for them, but he wouldn't put it past them if they hadn't noticed his and Will's absence. They broke into a run, hurrying down the street and along the woods until they turned onto a new street of houses. Will paused to scan for Dustin, Lucas, and Max before he found them a couple houses down, walking down a driveway.

As Will and Mike hurried to join them, with Will once again getting his video camera ready for filming, Max looked back at them, and then the two boys on either side of her followed her gaze.

"Where did you guys go?" Lucas asked, a small amount of guilt seeming to creep into his expression.

Mike scoffed. "Why didn't you stop to wait for us?" He demanded, glancing angrily towards Max. That small gesture of his caused an immediate change in Lucas' demeanor. His shoulders tensed and he slipped in front of Max ever so slightly. Dustin gave Lucas the side-eye.

"Sorry," Lucas replied icily, "But we didn't see you two separate from the group! Maybe just tell us if you're stopping next time."

Will sighed and stopped recording as Mike and Lucas broke into a small argument, and he looked around wearily. Dustin sidled up to Max the moment Lucas moved away from her. "They argue a lot." He quipped, pointing at Mike and Lucas. Especially Lucas though. Then he beamed at her with the use of his trusty front teeth. "Sometimes you just can't get them to shut up and use common sense."

Max wasn't impressed. She watched the four boys and started to wonder why she came at all. Her gaze wandered beyond the boys and onto a white figure walking towards them, and then slowing to a stop several feet away from them.

"Hey stalkers, looks like you've got yourselves a ghost to catch." She declared over their voices, pointing toward the ghost kid, and they went quiet and looked to the ghost as well. She just wanted to direct all the attention away from herself, and it seemed to work.

"Oh man. Should we-?" Dustin asked with a wide grin, looking around at all of them and lifting his homemade ghost trap.

Will's face had turned pale. He shook his head. "We saw them in the woods back there. That was why we separated from the group." he said. "They followed us."

Mike felt an odd chill run down his spine. The ghost was closer to

them than it had been before, and he saw their gaze flicker to all of them, then settle on *him*. Again. And maybe it was his imagination, but the air between them felt like there was something like electricity existing between the gap of the Ghostbusters and the Ghost. Like the static you could feel on a TV if you brought your hand or face right to the screen. Warm and powerful. Like you were about to get shocked. But this was just a kid, right...?

Then why did they feel so... *otherworldly*? If he didn't know any better, and if he couldn't see converse shoes sticking out of the bottom of the sheet, he might begin to second guess and think that this Trick-Or-Treater actually WAS a ghost. He couldn't help it. He was curious - and a little creeped out - at this point.

"Why are you following us?" He called. The figure almost seemed to flinch.

Lucas' nose crinkled. He shrugged it off. "We *are* the Ghostbusters right now. It's probably a joke."

Mike jerked his head in something like half of a head shake. There was something about this ghost now that didn't feel like a joke, against his previous judgement. His eyes were glued to the face of the ghost, which was equally glued to him. Something deep inside him whispered false hopes, making his heart jump towards his throat. Then, slowly... the ghost lifted a hand. The sheet slipped off enough so that some of their forearm and their hand was visible. And they held their hand out in front of them, like a still wave. The hand was shaking.

A strange wave of mystery, fear, eerie familiarity, and unexpected nostalgia swirled up from an unknown hiding place at an incredible rate, hitting his head with a heavy force and making it feel like his brain almost jumped. He felt lightheaded, and his vision seemed to spazz out for a brief second. Geez, what was wrong with him? But when he saw that hand, the way it was held, the way it shook - another wave of the same horrible yet wonderful feeling rushed through him.

Maybe it was just some lonely kid. Maybe he was going crazy and his mind was making him see this kid the way he wanted to see her. But

she felt so *familiar*, like the familiar feeling he got in his dreams. The dreams that always felt so real. Dreams that were far better than reality. The dreams he woke up feeling emptier than ever from. There was a lump in his throat now. Boy, did he want this dream to be real.

But it was probably just some kid. Some lonely kid. Mike tried to swallow the lump in his throat, and mentally kept telling himself that he was getting too emotional again, and that it was only wishful thinking. Still, he figured... Even if it was just some lonely kid... Well... Who wants to be alone on Halloween? At the very least, he could wave back.

His heart pounded in his chest, not listening to the logic that he was trying to push back into his mind. Slowly, he raised his arm out, just like the ghost was doing, and he held his hand up in the same still wave. His hand was shaking just as much as their's. He took in a sharp breath.

The static felt stronger. And it felt like it only existed between the two of them now.

2. Part Two: Charlie Brown

Authors Note: You guys asked for it, your reviews made me smile, so here it is! Part Two!

Two versions of this actually exist now, because while I was writing, it started to turn far bigger than I had originally planned because of the direction I took it. However, this version doesn't stay true to the tone that I really wanted for this piece, so here is the one that I really had planned in my heart-of-hearts, which is just nice and sweet. :)

My alternative one would lend itself more to having many more chapters, so if you guys are interested in a more angsty (but still with good feels as well), ongoing series around this idea, I might post that AU of this little AU as a separate work. But for A Ghostly Encounter, I feel like it needs to stay nice and simple.

Thank you, my lovelies, and without further ado: enjoy!

They both stood there, each holding their hand up for such a short period of time, but it felt a lot longer. It was like they were in a mutual trance - well, at least Mike felt like he was in a trance. It felt like the Ghost was trying to silently communicate with him, and he was trying to figure just what it was they were saying. Then the voices of his friends slowly pulled Mike back into reality until he had completely snapped out of his trance.

"Dude, what's up with him?" Max. That was Max.

"I don't know. He gets weird sometimes." Lucas had replied in a low tone.

Mike felt his face flush as he realized he probably had been standing there looking at the Ghost for an uncomfortably long time for everyone else. He shot Lucas a hurt glare nonetheless.

What was he thinking? There was simply no way. His mind was just playing tricks on him again, like when he sometimes thought that he would hear a quiet voice crackling through the static of his super

comm, and sometimes he would even think he felt something, sort of like the static he thought he felt with the Ghost just now. Or on that horrible night, when he thought he saw that ghostly-pale face in the window - the face that was seared into his psyche. He had a really powerful imagination. He always did.

Lucas shrugged his shoulders up ever-so-slightly, looking a little guilty, and he turned quickly to look at the next house on the street just to avoid facing Mike. "Can we go now?" He asked, the edge in his voice from their earlier argument gone. It was replaced by that guilt that he and Dustin sometimes got when they mentioned Eleven, or when they mentioned the Upside Down around Will.

Mike looked at each of his friends, and Max. They were all looking at him. He was distinctly aware of the feeling of the Ghost's eyes still watching the back of his head. He nodded and cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah." He said. He got a quick glance back. He thought he saw that hand still reaching out, but their fingers were curling down into their palm, like the hand was wilting. "Let's go."

Lucas' eyebrows raised. "Yeah?"

Mike nodded, firmer now. "Yeah."

Max blinked and looked between the boys, a little confused, and unaware of the silent communication that was there. Lucas didn't usually directly say it, but this was his way of making sure things were okay.

There was an awkward silence.

"That candy isn't gonna get itself." Dustin commented to fill the silence, laughing a little.

That did the trick. Everybody just naturally started moving again, toward the next house. Just as before, Lucas, Max, and Dustin were in the lead, and Mike and Will fell behind. But very quickly, with every step closer to the next house, a feeling that Mike was missing out on something grew stronger and stronger in his stomach, so much so that he couldn't help but look back to that Ghost again. There was still that very faint possibility... His logic kicked his gut feelings in

the shin. But then those feelings just got back up again when he saw that they were still standing there, their arm down now, and they were looking at the ground, but they seemed to come back to attention when his gaze fell back on her - no, *them*. He didn't know for sure. It wasn't fair of him to assume.

He went ahead and bit the bullet just to ease the sense of dread he would keep feeling if he just left this person on their own. He jerked his head in the direction the group was going, as a silent invitation to the Ghost to join them. He didn't want to hold anyone up anymore, so he kept following them and assumed that the Ghost would catch up to them if they wanted to come. Will looked at Mike questioningly, and Mike just shrugged. "I don't know. I just... I feel bad for them." He said. He decided to keep his deeper, more tentative reason - the one he still wasn't directly admitting even to himself, and he was actively trying to smother it away - unsaid.

Will glanced back over his shoulder, then he nodded. "Yeah... Me too." He admitted. Mike smiled at his friend gratefully. It was nice to know he wasn't being a complete weirdo. Even without the trace of hope he had for the stranger's identity, just this one ghost waving pitifully to their group was enough to tug at one's sympathy. As Mike thought about it, maybe the Ghost just reminded him of himself before he met any of his friends. Maybe that was it. There was the sound of Converse hitting sidewalk as the Ghost ran up and joined them, and his hopes wrestled with his mind yet again as his insides twisted up in a knot.

The white-sheet-covered figure slipped in between Will and Mike, completing the group as an even number. Mike was afraid to look at them. He was trying half-heartedly to smother the feeling that was burning in his stomach now. He tried to ignore that feeling of static that felt warmer and stronger than ever before, telling himself over again that it was his active imagination trying to prove that his hopes were correct. Then, as the group hit the driveway of the house, Will piped in. "Hey, don't you have something to hold your candy in?" He asked.

Mike finally brought himself to look out of curiosity. Everyone else had brought a pillowcase to collect their hoards of treats, which they had all started using just a few years ago. But the Ghost looked at

their empty hands - those hands that brought back that rush of mixed feelings inside of Mike - and she shook her head. Mike's head felt cloudy again, his heart's rate quickened, and a rush of adrenaline made him slip into a pure impulsive state. He spoke before he could even process it.

"Well, that's okay!" He blurted out a little too loudly, and he heard a small gasp come from underneath the sheet as the Ghost looked at him. "I think Dustin has a ghost trap you can use."

They had slowed to a stop in front of the porch of their next stop, and the three that had been in front of them previously had turned to look, especially at the mention of Dustin's name. Mike froze like he was caught with a hand in a forbidden cookie jar.

Lucas groaned. "What are they doing here?" He asked.

Mike was still running on an impulse that was very familiar - far too familiar, in fact. It was giving him that nostalgic feeling - and he became defensive. Who did Lucas even think he was to even ask that? He brought Max along. "What, You're making us exclusive *now*? How would you feel if YOU were out alone on Halloween?" He retorted. Lucas scowled as he caught Mike subtly but not-so-subtly complaining about Max again.

Mike ignored this, and he turned sharply to Dustin. "Can she have your ghost trap for candy?" He asked, probably a little too harshly.

Dustin's mouth opened to protest, but then he glanced at Max, then he smiled in an exaggeratedly cordial way. "Uh, sure." He said, coughing up his homemade prop to Mike.

"Wait, 'she'?" Lucas questioned. Mike mentally cursed himself, and tried to think of a way to slide his way out of that slip-up without admitting the truth. He was getting a look from his friend that said "Do we have to talk about *last year things*?", which was the last thing any of them really wanted to do. Especially because they couldn't talk about it with Max and some other kid around. Mike's face turned red.

"Uh, yeah! I mean, I-" He stalled.

"He's right. I'm..." A girl's voice, weirdly pitched lower in a way that sounded like she was intentionally speaking with a deeper voice, spoke up, and Mike took in a sharp breath as he slowly looked to the source. "I'm a girl." She said.

This made him simultaneously relieved but also way more flustered. His hopes soared and shattered some glass roof inside his mind. He swallowed hard, and in another dead silence, he brought the ghost trap over to the Ghost and he handed it over in a way that somehow managed to be far too animated, but also stilted and awkward. He didn't look her directly in the eye, scared to see what he may or may not find, but he felt the eyes staring at him. "Here." He said quietly, then he turned away from her just so he wouldn't accidentally catch those eyes. Those eyes would be the tell-all, for better or for worse. And he feared the worse.

"It actually kind of works, right?" He said, looking at his friends, "It's like we're catching a ghost!"

Just like magic, the reference brought some light in everyone's mood. Ghostbusters had a way of doing that. Dustin and Will grinned and laughed.

"You're a bunch of nerds." Max said, rolling her eyes, but she was amused too.

Mike still looked Lucas in the eye, who was internally giving in before he ultimately caved and shrugged it off. "Alright. Come on." He agreed.

Then they got back to Trick-Or-Treating, and the Ghost seemed to blend seamlessly into the group once they got going. She stayed silent almost entirely; when someone giving out candy opened the door to the crew of six, she would just silently stick out the ghost trap for candy without a word. As they walked from door to door, they just went back to chatting, and she just listened. Eventually, Max seemed to take an interest in the Ghost, and she fell back to walk next to her, which ultimately combined the group. The presence of this mysterious, quiet girl brought some excitement for everyone, and Mike found himself pushed to the back of the group as Max talked and the Ghost listened (and Lucas and Dustin practically hung on

every word). He didn't mind, though. It gave him just a chance to watch the ghostly figure, and hope for some sort of clue.

He probably wasn't being too subtle with his staring. But he couldn't help it. He just kept wondering. What if it was her? What if it *wasn't*? What if he accidentally gets too friendly, and it turns out to be someone else? How would he get out of that? That would make him feel guilty, not only for the Ghost, but also for the girl he was hoping she was.

... But what if they were one and the same after all? Then what if he's too distant with her the whole time, because he isn't sure? Then he would definitely feel guilty.

Then there was that warmth, that static that suddenly started prickling at his skin again, and made her ghostly costume feel even more real. She really was like a ghost, at least to him. Around that time, Will was mumbling and messing with his video camera beside Mike.

"I don't get it. It's not recording anything anymore." Will said.

Mike tore his gaze from the Ghost. "What? Really?" He asked.

Will nodded, looking disappointed. "Yeah. It's weird. Every time I press record, it immediately stops." He replied, and he looked at the small tape inside the camera. "Maybe I used all my film up. Or..." He turned his camera in a different direction, away from the group, and tried to record again. "Oh! It's fine, now!"

"Oh, good." Mike said, watching the video camera with some interest.

"Yeah. I was worried I wouldn't be able to catch the whole night for a second there." Will muttered to himself, then he smiled. "You know, they say it's really hard to catch a ghost on camera." He joked, "So maybe that's it."

Mike tried to smile, but the suggestion that she was somehow interfering with the camera struck him as an actual possibility. His mouth went dry, and he looked toward the Ghost, then back at Will, who seemed to be able to tell there was something on his mind. Mike

opened his mouth to speak, but then he hesitated for a long time. It was crazy. Too crazy. Stupid.

But this was Will. He didn't make anyone feel bad for saying anything stupid. He had turned away from Will for a few seconds before suddenly whipping back to his friend at an incredible rate.

"Do you think she goes to our school?" Mike spat out at fifty miles per hour. His eyes were wide.

Will laughed hesitantly. "Um, what?" He replied, glancing back to the ghostly figure. Max was currently giving her some tips for how to get to level six in Mrs. Pacman.

Mike hesitated some more, feeling self-conscious about his question now. But not enough to back-pedal out of it now. "The Ghost. Do you think she's someone from our school?" He elaborated quietly, his shoulders shrugging up in embarrassment.

Will laughed half-heartedly. "I don't know. She probably would have started making fun of us by this point if she was, you know?" He said. He was smiling and sort of joking, but there was a small amount of bitterness there. It was a joking-bitterness that all four of the boys were mutually familiar with feeling and expressing.

Mike stared at the ground. He had a point. "Yeah... Probably." He agreed. He swallowed audibly, playing with the idea of just leaving the conversation at that. He was becoming more and more convinced of the Ghost's potential identity again.

Will gave Mike a quizzical look, then he looked back to his video camera and he shrugged. "Why don't you just ask her?" He suggested in a lightly amused tone.

Mike's head whipped up and his mouth opened to give a panicky retort that just wasn't there, because that was the most logical choice of action and he knew it. He shrugged his shoulders up again and laughed nervously instead. He shifted his attention back to the Ghost, his stomach flipping as he thought about taking his friend's advice. But he didn't really need to ask her anything like that at this point. He just needed to ask -

"So, what's your name, then?" Max asked the Ghost.

- Her name.

It seemed to occur to the four boys all at once that they had spent the past half an hour with a girl and they didn't even think to ask for her name. Everyone fell into an anticipatory silence. There was no answer for a long time. A very long time. The shrouded head turned down to the ground. "Um... I'm..."

"Is it... Charlie Brown? Because you remind me of him with that ghost costume." Max joked, trying to ease the other girl to some degree.

The Ghost broke out in a giggle. She spoke in an even deeper voice than she had been using before. " 'I got a rock.' " She quoted. That got a light chuckle out of everyone. Then she just fell back into another silence, and she avoided everyone's eyes, clearly not intending to actually answer the question. Another point was added to Mike's mental scoreboard of wishful thinking. Who else would avoid giving their name? Then she spoke again, redirecting the conversation towards Max. "What is... your name?" She asked, pointing at Max. That voice. The slightly awkward inflections in her speech. Mike's vision spazzed out again and his stomach did a cartwheel. Somehow, this was real. It felt like a dream, but it was real. He was staring at her, eyes wide and holding his breath, just waiting for some final confirmation.

Max gave her a knowing look, crossing her arms. "I'm Max. And *you are?*" She asked, speaking slowly to emphasize the fact that she could see right through the Ghost's very weak attempt at avoiding her question.

There is another long pause. The Ghost was put in the spot with no way to wriggle out of it now. They had stopped in the middle of a sidewalk to add even more pressure, because, well, normally most people aren't this hesitant to give someone their own name. It seemed to have everyone intrigued, to say the least. Or maybe they had the same idea as Mike at this point. Mike noticed with a dizzying thrill that she hadn't asked any of the boys for their names, like anyone else would have done if they didn't already know who they were. He caught her glancing to him. Brown. Brown eyes. She had brown eyes.

At least ninety-eight points to Mike's mental scoreboard.

"T'm- I'm Sue." She blurted out in a way-too-loud, flustered voice. If this had been any other situation, and if Mike hadn't been so disappointed, the way she said it would have been almost funny.

In fact, Max did laugh a little, not being able to help it, and Dustin and Lucas joined in hesitantly. Max's face hardened and she shot them a look, as though scolding them for laughing at her. Then she looked back to... Sue. She smiled. "Nice to meet you, Sue."

Mike found that name grating his very skin. But there again, it could have been any name, and he wouldn't like it as long as it wasn't the one he was hoping for. As stupid as it was. He had been stupid. So, so stupid. He let his hopes get way too high, and now... Well, now he was in too deep, and he still didn't find himself believing she really was just some girl named Sue. Not when she felt so familiar to him. Or maybe it really was his overactive imagination. But somewhere along the line, his mind had really latched on, and now he didn't want to let go.

Maybe it was just a cover up. What if she just was keeping up the disguise? After all, there was that voice... and her eyes... and her hands. Geez, he was beginning to feel a little like a creep. It didn't help that he realized Max had just caught him staring, and she had given him the same look she gave all four of the boys when she called them stalkers.

He kept wrestling internally, continuously flip-flopping between hope and doubt, while they spent another two hours Trick-Or-Treating, showing "Sue" the best houses to get a lot of candy.

After a while, less and less of the houses had candy, and some no longer answered the door. They were hitting the large houses near the Wheelers' and Sinclairs' houses that often still had candy now. "Once it gets later, if you just stand in the yard long enough, sometimes they'll give you the rest of the candy to make you leave." Dustin explained to Sue with a grin, when they waited just in front of the porch of a house that hadn't answered the door for them. They all tried to look mildly menacing. Or at least mischievous enough to mess up someone's yard.

"...Why?" Sue asked, staring at Dustin.

"Because if they don't, some kids might toilet paper their trees." Dustin replied. Sue stared at him, likely still confused.

"Or throw eggs at their house." Max added.

Sue looked at them, frowning, then she looked at Mike, which didn't help his case of convincing himself out of her identity. It really reminded him of how *she* would look at him when she had a question. He felt a little bitter. Why did she have to keep reminding him of *her*? ...Then he mentally kicked himself. He can't be mad if it actually is her...

He bit the bullet again and decided to explain it, either way. "Those are tricks. If you don't give Trick-Or-Treaters candy, they might pull a trick on you." He said.

Her eyes lit up. "Oh! *Trick-Or-Treat*. I under-" She froze. Mike froze. In fact, Lucas looked like he froze mid-movement from what Mike could tell in the corner of his eye. Then she cleared her throat. "That... makes sense." She corrected, overcompensating with an even deeper voice that wasn't really fooling anyone.

Still, Mike stared at her, not able to ignore another wave of the feeling that was becoming the theme of the night, apparently. He had felt it so many times, he was starting to get used to it rushing through his from his stomach, through his veins, and into his head like a horrible, wonderful electricity. Even with her attempted "save", he was now really having a hard time believing that she was some girl name Sue after all.

"Have you never gone Trick-Or-Treating?" Max asked curiously.

The Ghost slowly brought herself to nod her head. Mike managed to tear his gaze from her, and he found both Lucas and Dustin looking at him. Then they glanced at her. Where they getting the same idea?

A car pulled into the driveway. Dustin looked between the door they had been waiting in front of, and the car that was now coming to a complete stop with a growing look of fear. He cursed loudly.

Suddenly, an older man emerged from the driver's side of the car and was striding towards them, shaking a fist and pointing at them while spewing loud profanities at them and telling them to get off of his yard. They high-tailed it off of that yard as fast as they could, even far down the street away from the house before they slowed down, and they could still hear him yelling about how he would call the police if they so much as thought about doing a single amount of damage to his property.

Dustin bent over and caught his breath while fighting fits of laughter, and Will soon joined in laughing as he held his camera up. "I got it on tape," He managed to say between fits of laughter. At that point, it was infectious. Even Lucas, who was trying to be mad, just couldn't.

Dustin slapped Will on the back. "Good job! Oh man..." He replied. Will grinned.

"You guys were so scared!" Max laughed.

"Yeah, did you see Dustin?" Lucas tried to smoothly direct the comment away from himself, but it wasn't very smooth. Especially because it had fallen at an unfortunately quieter moment, when everyone heard it. It went awkwardly quiet.

Max smirked, but she did look mildly irritated. "Oh, no. I was talking about *you*, mostly." She jabbed, almost harshly, and Lucas looked mortified, his face flushed.

There was a horrible pause, and then Max turned heel and kept walking. Taking advantage of the moment, Dustin smacked Lucas' arm. "Way to ruin things." He hissed.

Lucas tried to glare at him, but it was half-hearted. His scowl faded away and he nodded slightly before hurrying up to catch up with Max. He was starting to apologize.

"You owe me an apology too!" Dustin called. He galloped to catch up with them, and something of a bicker started to break between all three of them.

Will, Mike, and the Ghost looked on. Mike shook his head. He turned

to the Ghost, running more on impulse than his own reason. "I promise Trick-Or-Treating isn't normally like this," He said consolingly, like he would have if the Ghost was who he had hoped she was. She suddenly turned and met his gaze with wide eyes. Smiling eyes? Eyes didn't smile, but... he could tell she was smiling. His heart jumped, and he realized his potential mistake. But... that was a perfectly reasonable thing to say, either way... Right? She was right beside him, and he finally became aware of the fact that she had been gripping his arm, probably since they had ran from the old man at their last house. She quickly retracted, and Mike moved away, his face burning.

"Okay. It's still cool." She replied. The smile in her voice was apparent. Even though Mike felt like he was going crazy for doing so, he couldn't help but smile too.

Static was there.

The Ghost slowly looked over to Will, who had been watching with questions in his eyes, not really sure what else to do. Mike wished she hadn't, if he was being completely honest with himself, but he looked on anyway. She pointed to Will's video camera. "Takes... pictures?" She asked. There was something in her tone that, while it sounded curious, there was also something else there.

Will lit up. "Oh, no. It's a video camera. You can record movies and play them back. It's really cool." He replied, showing the camera to her. She inspected it.

"Like on TV?" She asked.

Will nodded. "You need a VCR to play them, but yeah." He said.

"Am I... On the movie?" She probed. Mike finally picked up the other part of her tone that he couldn't put his finger on before. Anxiety. He watched her carefully.

"You might be, on this last one, yeah." Will answered, his smile fading, as he probably picked up on the anxiety in the Ghost's voice as well.

She looked away. "Oh." Was all she said.

If she was the one who Mike missed so much... Well, that anxiety might make sense. Had she been hiding this whole time? Or maybe "Sue" was just camera shy. But he had trouble believing that alternative, somehow.

"But you're in costume, right?" Mike blurted out to her, smiling sheepishly, "So you don't have to worry so much."

She jumped a little at the sound of his voice, whirling back to him. "...Yes. You're right." She agreed, sighing the anxiety that had been in her voice away.

Their eyes lingered on each others' for a long moment. Mike felt pretty sure he was right, despite it all. He thought about asking her for himself right then and there, but then their names were called. Apparently Max, Lucas, and Dustin had worked their conflict out, at least to some degree, because they were ready to try and hit the last few houses.

As they started walking again for what felt like the fiftieth time that evening, the Ghost looked back to Will and pointed at the camera again. "Very cool." She said. Will grinned in response.

The night slowed to a close, but in that final amount of time, Mike found himself feeling the wonderment that he used to. Sure, it still wasn't the best Halloween overall, with the bouts of conflict and drama, but he found himself a little more forgiving of all that now. And it was because she was there. He was sure the Ghost was her. Unlike all of the other terrifying mysteries that he and his friends had experienced last year, she was the one mystery he wished he could face every day. She changed the way he viewed his reality, making it feel bigger and better than it would ever be without her. And he felt the nervous excitement build as he just waited for a moment to ask her - or a moment to just let her know that he knows.

Max left first, having to hurry into Billy's car without much of a goodbye, but she looked to them regretfully, and she gave the Ghost in particular a small wave. The look on her face started to make Mike feel a little guilty for disliking her presence with their party so much.

But decided that he would think about that later. Jonathan was waiting for Will by the Wheeler's house by the time they made it back there. And then Dustin and Lucas took their bikes and rode off to their respective houses. The Ghost had stuck close to Mike's side all the while, as they wished everyone goodbye and watched the group dwindle down.

After seeing Dustin and Lucas off, Mike was dizzy with anticipation, but now he was feeling unsure. He didn't even know what to say. He couldn't just turn to her and ask, "Hey, by the way, are you Eleven?", could he?

They were quiet for a long moment. Then he cleared his throat. "Uh... Thanks for going Trick-Or-Treating with us, I guess..." He said, looking at her and finding himself lost in her thrilled, expectant eyes. His eyes darted to the ghost trap that she still had clutched in her hand.

"Do you want more candy?" He spat out at warp speed, surprising even himself. Then he set his sack down before he even saw or heard a response and shoveled a handful out of his bag, then he dumped it into the already pretty full box, making it overflow. Candy spilled out onto the pavement. "Oh." He mumbled, embarrassed, and he crouched down to collect the candy from off the ground.

She laughed softly, and... tearfully. "Mike. It's okay." She said. His head shot up, then he stood up fast, his mouth agape, and a strike of lightning hitting his insides.

"Eleven?" Mike spoke, the name feeling wonderful to say. He found himself tearing up too, now. She nodded. They were both trembling from head to toe. He couldn't stop smiling. "*Eleven?*" He asked again, as though to make sure that what was happening was real. Wonderfully real. Even though his ears were ringing and his vision was blurring, it was happening right then, in real time.

She nodded. "Mike."

Candy cascaded out of her ghost trap as it tilted and eventually dropped completely out of her hand, and was left disregarded on the ground, as they rushed to close the small gap that existed between

each other. And they held tight to each other, laughing and crying. Their faces buried into each other's shoulders, both taking in the tangibility of the other, and simultaneously trying to assure the other that they were right there too.

Mike kept telling her "I knew it. I knew it." in strings.

Eleven assured him over and over again, "I know. I know you did."

When Mike pulled away to look her in the eye, he had almost forgotten that she was still covered in a sheet in the midst of his pure joy. He laughed in spite of himself, and he tried to quickly wipe his eyes and face dry. "I-I never gave up on you. I called you every night-"

The wind was knocked right out of him by another tight hug from her. "I missed you, every day." She replied. Her voice was right next to his ear, and it was thrilling, to say the least.

Mike felt so full.

When they separated again, he looked at all the candy that was on the ground. His eyes widened, and he bent down to hurriedly pick it all up. Eleven bent down too, and she put a hand on his arm. "Mike. I can do it." She assured him.

Flustered, he quickly retracted. "Oh. Um, okay." He replied. He watched her put her night's earnings back in the trap for a minute before piping in, when he saw her picking up a fairly large Hershey's chocolate bar. "Oh! Those are really good, I think you'll like it."

Eleven paused, inspecting the treat with interest. She seemed to consider opening it right then and there, but then she quickly added it to the ghost trap. Mike swallowed. He guessed it would be a little tricky to eat candy with that costume over her...

"El?" He asked, moving a little too emphatically for no reason. She stopped packing away her sweets immediately and she looked up at him. His nerves gripped him suddenly, but he pushed past them. "After Trick-Or-Treating, I usually eat some of my candy, um... In the basement. Do..." He hesitated, then he mumbled at rapid-fire:

"Doyouwanttocomeinsideandeatsomeofyourcandywithme?"

Her eyes lit up at first. Then she wilted slightly, looking away. She seemed... conflicted. "I..." She paused for a long moment, then the conflict in her eyes disappeared and she seemed to have firmly decided something. "Yes." She said, quietly, but Mike could swear she was smiling. He grinned, laughing nervously and excitedly. He had kept that blanket fort up all year just for when she came back, like tonight. Now she was here, and he could keep his promise. He couldn't completely ignore the thousands of questions he had for her running in his head, but he had decided that he would ask them later. Right now, he just wanted to take her home.

"A-Alright. Okay!" He said, his voice pitching a little higher, and he proceeded to quickly shovel the rest of her candy into her ghost trap.

Then they stood up, and Eleven took her box of candy in one hand, while Mike started to guide her in the direction of his house with her other hand, his own bag of candy slung over his shoulder. She resisted his lead for a moment, looking off down the road, then she scanned all around.

"...El?" Mike asked, hesitantly.

Eleven shook her head, and then she looked him in the eye. "Let's go." She said, with some finality to the statement. He tried to search for some reason for her behavior by looking in her eyes, feeling a little concerned over her hesitation. But then she had suddenly shed all the hesitation away.

Mike added this to his list of questions for her, as she let him lead the way around his house, and to the basement door.

Authors Note: PSYCH! This chapter was getting long, so stay tuned for Part Three.

3. Part Three: Blink And You'll Miss It

Author's Note: PLAIDY IS ON BREAK, and this is finally here. I've been kept super busy this past month, which is why I took so long. So sorry for the wait! But now that I am free, I definitely plan on writing a lot more. If you're interested in what I plan on doing next, feel free to check out my profile to see what I have in store. Also, if you want to see me writing a particular thing, feel free to send me a request and I'll see what I can do with it!

Anyhow, this is mostly pretty sappy, but there's other little character threads in it too. I hope you enjoy, and that the wait was worth it!

Mike unceremoniously dumped all of his candy from his bag on the table that sat in front of the couch. Just the sight of so much candy still brought that familiar childish glee, even if it wasn't quite as strong as it used to be. Eleven tipped the ghost trap over and added her more meager amount to the pile. It was a glorious mountain. Well, it was more of a hill.

They sat down, both perching right on the ledge of the couch and at the ready to feast, but for a they simply admired the large collection of sweets for a moment.

Then Mike gestured to the pile. "Well... Dig in." He said. Then he looked at her with nervous excitement. He really wanted to see her. Like, without looking like a ghost. But he didn't want to stare. He tore his gaze away from her and looked down at his knees, even though a large part of him didn't want to miss any second or detail of the person he missed so much.

He cleared his throat, and just started talking to fill the silence. "I got even more candy last year. Dustin didn't come to school the day after Halloween because he ate almost all of his candy, and-"

Movement in the corner of his eye distracted him immediately from any train of thought he had previously had. His gaze quickly snapped back to Eleven just as she was lifting the sheet up to her face. Then in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it second, it was thrown over her head and the

disguise lay crumpled in a heap behind her.

Mike's heart and stomach leapt a foot in the air. It was *her*. Well, he already knew that. But that's all that kept shouting in his head. It was her. Her face. And *hair*. It had never occurred to him that her hair would grow curly, but it somehow made perfect sense in that moment now that he saw it.

Now he couldn't take his eyes off her. She had reached to the candy pile and now had a Hershey's chocolate bar that she had previously been interested in, but her eyes flickered between that and looking back at him, a small smile on her face. That *smile*. He couldn't help but smile widely right back to her, his heart feeling even more full.

Many more heartfelt words flooded in Mike's mind, but the words "Your hair's grown." just fell out instead.

Eleven nodded. "It's curly." She said, somewhat ruefully, but still pleased nonetheless. Her eyes fell back to the chocolate in her hand, and she tugged a small tear at the end of the wrapper with her fingers.

"No!" He piped up loudly, startling himself as well as her, then he leveled himself before continuing, "-I mean, yeah. It is curly, but, it looks good." He explained, looking away. Then his head quickly swiveled back to her so he could quickly add, "Really good."

Eleven absent-mindedly played with the torn edge of her Hershey bar's wrapper, staring at him with a thrilled light in her eyes, and she exhaled quietly. Then she looked to her chocolate with a wide smile.

The space between them felt like a cozy warmth.

Mike looked away, his stomach flipping as the look on her face remained etched into his mind. He was so happy she was home. Her return seemed to have unlocked one million new possibilities in his mind. He could keep his promises now. And he could try and give her a normal life, finally. He had to. She deserved it. And she would just be here with him now, existing in his life again, making his whole reality feel different. Better. More exciting. And not just exciting because she was basically a real life superhero, although that

certainly made her even more amazing. But if she didn't have them, she would still make things far more exciting than anything he had ever known before.

He leaned forward to pluck a fun-sized pack of Reeses' Pieces out of their pile of candy, and when his eyes drifted back to her, she had taken a rather sizable bite out of the large chocolate bar instead of breaking the bar into pieces like people usually did. Then her eyes went wide as the taste of the sweet chocolate apparently hit her tongue. Mike laughed as she greedily took another large bite, almost completely engulfing the entire bar, then she wolfed the small portion left shortly after.

Now he didn't feel so bad for his own eating habits as he poured the Reeses' Pieces into his hand and shoveled all the small candies into his mouth at once. Eleven pointed to the empty package he had cast aside and looked at Mike eagerly. "Are those good?" She asked.

Mike nodded vigorously. "Yeah! Reeses is great!" He replied through a full mouth. He watched, amused and transfixed, as she swooped down upon the pile of candy and started pulling out collections of Hershey's candy and Reeses' Pieces in bulk. Mike scooted forward a little and started to sort through the candy to show her which ones he thought were the best, and she took samples of each one, eyeing them hungrily.

He was mid-explanation about how some people give knock-off brand candy that sometimes looks similar to good candy, but it tastes worse, and then how caramels are okay, but they are given out way too much than they really deserved to be, when he came to a realization. She had been wolfing down candy with an indulgent ferocity while she listened to him, nodding seriously at the information he was giving her. "...Are you hungry?" He asked.

This question did come slightly late, seeing as she was currently surrounded by a mound of chocolate wrappers. *Nice going. You promised to give her real food when she came back.* Although, it was Halloween. And she definitely wasn't complaining. She had already managed to eat twice as much candy as him, partly due to him busying himself with talking, and because she clearly couldn't get enough of the sweets.

But she nodded as she tasted a Sweet Tart. That was enough to give Mike some guilt.

"I- I can go get you some real food. Um, I know that candy-"

"-It's not very healthy." Eleven finished, almost as though she was reciting it. She nodded and almost... rolled her eyes?

Mike stared at her with surprise and confusion. Where did she learn that? "Um... Yeah. So, my mom probably has leftovers from dinner," He stood up, "I can go get you some-"

Suddenly her hand flew out and snatched his arm. "Stay." She insisted, looking rather intense before her face softened and she gave a quiet, breathy laugh, "I don't care about that." She paused, then she grew more serious as she looked at him with a warm expression he felt like he didn't deserve to receive from her. She didn't want him to leave. "You wanted to have candy."

Mike moved back toward the couch, and he shrugged. "I mean, it's no big deal, you can have more candy for dessert, or something. I don't want you to be hungry. And, I don't care whether or not we eat candy, I mean it's just a thing I do, but I really..." His chin tucked against his chest and he mumbled, red faced, "I really just wanted to see you, and... stuff..."

Eleven's grip on Mike's arm tightened. He dared to look back at her, feeling rather swimmy, and the static was dancing between the space that existed between them. She was staring at him, her expression having been lit from her previous firmness into a thrilled, adoring one.

They shared one of those nice, quiet moments of just looking at each other and appreciating each other's existence, that just let all the things he had trouble saying communicate themselves with silence, and he somehow he was able to understand exactly what she was saying without words too.

Then she tugged lightly on his arm, and he quickly sat back down, smiling as her hand loosened from his wrist and slid to his hand. And then she had leaned against him, making his stomach do a cartwheel,

and he naturally let his head rest on top of her's, and the world felt so *right* for a time. And-

"Michael? Are you down there?" His mom's voice called from the hallway, just outside the basement door.

Mike's previously melted insides tensed as Eleven shot upright and turned rigid, and she looked at him seriously. "...Can't know I'm here!" She whispered.

The dread in her demeanor clicked with him instantly and he knew what to do, as though a day hadn't really passed since they last saw each other. He sped over to the bottom of the basement stairs.

"Yeah, I'm here!" He shouted back to his mother.

Mrs. Wheeler opened the basement door, and Mike shot a glance back to Eleven's spot on the couch, which had been vacated. She had ducked into the blanket fort, and pressed a finger to her lips when she caught Mike's gaze, her eyes wide, before tugging the top blanket down so that the small space was hidden. He hurriedly ascended the steps to meet his mother before she came down the steps any further, and he casually blocked her away by putting a hand on each railing. "Hi, Mom!" He said, trying to sound as normal as possible.

Mrs. Wheeler gave him a mildly bemused smile. "I didn't hear you come in. How was Trick-Or-Treating?" She asked.

"I came in through the basement." Mike explained, raking his fingers through his hair, "Um, it was good."

It was really good.

"Yeah?" She responded, a little lamely. She was in one of those trying-to-be-involved modes, but she had apparently run out of things to say.

Mike nodded and hastily replied, "Yeah. Good haul this year! Uh..." He looked at his mother, just wondering what it was she wanted. He glanced at his watch. 9:30. Great.

"CanIstayuptillten?" He asked in rapid fire, looking at her

imploringly.

Mrs. Wheeler blinked in surprise. Then she attempted to look stern with him, but she couldn't. She was a sucker for holidays. Mike gave her his best smile, trying to be charming, or something. She laughed. "No later than ten."

Mike wanted to let out a whoop, but he feared coming across as too enthusiastic. He turned and made his way back down the steps, calling over his shoulder, "Thanks, Mom!"

"- Michael." His mother spoke up, raising her voice a little in an odd tone. Oh no. What did she notice? He turned slowly toward her, his shoulders tensed. But he was met by an oddly... wistful expression?

"Do you have any dark chocolate for me?" His mother asked. He felt the smallest twinge of guilt and obligation.

He didn't like dark chocolate. He especially didn't like it when he was younger. It became something of a tradition for him to pick out all the pieces of dark chocolate and give it to her to eat, because she loved the more bitter sweets. The memory of a much-smaller him sitting at the dining room with his mom as he ate his choice candy while she enjoyed the dark chocolates instinctively arose in his mind.

Did he give her any dark chocolate last year? He couldn't remember. But he had to have... Right?

He swallowed, glancing halfway toward the candy pile. "Oh. Um... I haven't sorted through all my candy yet, but when I do, I'm sure there will be." He said, feeling kind of awkward. She smiled, and yet that only managed to somehow make him feel worse. "...Tomorrow?" He suggested.

"Tomorrow." Mrs. Wheeler replied, lingering to give him a warm smile that his newfound independent streak recoil slightly. But at the same time, he felt oddly warmed inside too. Sort of. He hurriedly assured himself in his mind that he really didn't care *that* much, but you know, she was still his mom.

As she disappeared back behind the basement door, Mike shook his

head, still processing her latest attempt at reconnecting with him. This attempt, however, didn't make him completely want to roll his eyes. Halloween candy was actually something that he and his mom genuinely both enjoyed with each other, somehow. He sighed, and he made a note in his mind to sort any dark chocolate candy out of their pile.

Eleven peered cautiously through the smallest gap possible from the blanket, something that tugged at Mike's heart more than he could ever accurately describe. He shook his head again, clearing his thoughts as he cleared his throat as well. "...You can come out, now." He said.

Eleven slipped out from the fort and stood up, glancing at the small shelter fondly, before joining Mike back on the couch. He looked over back at the blanket fort, thinking of the many nights he spent sitting inside. Even now, it was the first place she thought to go to. He made a quiet noise from somewhere in his throat, the part of him that was still taking in her return wanting to spill out more about how he had called for her in that fort, and how much he had missed her. She had already started finishing up some chocolate she had been eating earlier, her eyes trained on that very same fort.

Now that he was thinking about those many days without her, the questions he had been saving earlier started piling back up, so much so that he didn't even know where to start. He found himself taking in every detail of her face for what must have been the one-hundredth time since she took off her ghost costume.

She glanced at him, catching his stare, and she gave him a sad smile. "What time is it?" She asked quietly.

Mike looked at his watch and felt his heart sink. "9:35." He replied. Her smile faded, and he rushed to add, "But I can tell my mom I'm gonna sleep in the basement! And-"

Eleven shook her head her disappointment still remaining. "I have to go... At ten." She explained miserably, her arms tucking around herself.

He blinked, his heart sinking deeper as this information set in. Wait...

She couldn't stay? But... He thought...

"You aren't-?" He croaked, and she looked at him ruefully, "I mean, you just... came home." He said quietly, looking at her with a mixture of disappointment, worry, and a small amount of shame for his almost pouting.

She pursed her lips and nodded sadly. "I know..."

She clearly didn't *want* to go. Mike frowned, and he couldn't help moving closer to ask, "Where are you going...?" He thought of the people who were looking for her last year. Bad people. If she hadn't been in the Upside Down, she had to have been hiding. Hiding this whole time. He mentally beat himself up for not going and looking for her enough.

Eleven looked away, shrinking back a little.

"Are... You in trouble...?" Mike asked in a low, anxious voice, finally expressing his biggest question. Oddly enough, she smiled ruefully again.

"I will be." He thought he heard her mumble with a small laugh, but she then quickly shook her head to reassure him. It wasn't very reassuring.

"El." Mike began, but he didn't have to finish. *Friends don't lie.*

Her eyes widened and she shook her head vigorously. "I'm not in trouble. I'm safe. I *promise*." She replied, grabbing his hands and holding them tight. She once again avoided his questioning gaze, and she opened her mouth to speak once again, but there was a long silence. Mike found himself tugging her hands closer to him, something that in any other context he would have given him a thrill, but right now he wanted to make sure she was okay. And maybe find out where she has been all this time. Just so he didn't have to go without her any longer.

A small smile tugged on the corner of her mouth when he drew her hands toward him, but it quickly faded. She sighed, and then she finally started explaining more. "I don't want to leave, but if I don't go

back... it... will be trouble. But... not bad." She said, then she thought for a moment before breathing out quickly, "Someone is keeping me safe."

Mike's mouth opened slightly, not being able to help feeling a slight sting at that new information. "Why didn't you... Come sooner?" He asked, hating the small crack he heard in his voice.

Eleven sighed, her brow furrowing down. "He kept promising I would be able to." She grumbled, "...Said he was waiting for the 'green light'."

He? Mike frowned, wondering who *he* was, and also already harboring some anger towards whoever kept her away. 353 days. Mike felt like he could have kept her safe himself all that time. He would have made sure of it. It didn't help that Eleven was so bitter about it right along with him. "*I missed you, every day*", she had said, something that made his heart full, but now he started picturing someone keeping her from seeing him for every single one of those days. A series of creative curses ran through his head, all directed at *him*. He really wanted to punch something to suppress the lump that was painfully forming in his throat.

"I came tonight, because costume." Eleven explained, breathing a small sigh. She clutched at his hands tighter.

He focused on her again, trying to calm himself down. He didn't want to freak out. He breathed deeply. It was a good idea on her part. If it wasn't completely safe for her yet, Halloween was the perfect night to blend in. And she had gone and found him. She had took her one night to see him again. And now she was here. Even though he kept thinking she should have been able to be here sooner, at least she was here now. This didn't necessarily help the lump in his throat, but it helped him calm down, despite it all.

She smiled. "I'm happy I did." She said.

Mike nodded, swallowing hard. Of course, he was happy she did too. He was nothing short of ecstatic that she came back. They both knew it.

His jaw was clenched as he tried in vain to fight an onslaught of emotion that was climbing up from the depths and hitting him hard. "I thought you might have been-" - He couldn't finish his sentence without replacing the harsh word he hadn't ever wanted to completely acknowledge. Even now, he didn't want to say it - "-Gone."

At that, Eleven's expression contorted. "Mike... I'm-"

In a moment in which he felt very exposed and quite honestly fragile, he pulled her into a tight hug. He had slumped over so that his face fell halfway into the top of her shoulder, where he felt a little more free to let a few hot tears drip from his eyes as he mumbled, "I really missed you, El." Into her shoulder. "I missed you so much."

He didn't have every part of her story, but even so, he felt all his joy, sadness, regret, shame, anger, and worry all hit him at once, his emotions finally catching up with him when he realized that she was the one he could be perfectly transparent with. She knew. She had wanted to see him just as much as he wanted to see her - granted, at least she knew he was alive. As far as Mike had known, she could have been gone forever. And now she had her arms around him, her breathing turning sharp and strained with her own tears as her face pressed against his hair, just barely whispering words to him that he didn't completely catch as he sobbed quietly, but it still meant the world to him regardless. It told him "*I'm here now*".

After some time, his rise in emotions diminished to a quiet contentedness for the moment, and his breathing slowed as they settled into a looser hold on each other, then Eleven pulled back to wipe the traces of his tears from his face, making heat rise into his face with shame, but with a thrill all the same. For a moment, he felt the urge to apologize for getting too emotional, but then he guessed that any semblance of keeping his cool around her had vanished after she had vanished for 353 days. And... maybe that was okay.

Especially because she had tears in her eyes and trailing down her face too, which he sheepishly reached to wipe away from her face in return.

They fell into a quiet, comfortable silence again, settling more comfortably on the couch and staying close together. Then they

quietly started to eat their candy again. The tears felt like a cleansing to Mike, and now the realness of everything finally started to set in. He still was begrudging the fact that someone was keeping her hidden away, but at least she was here now. He wanted to face the one keeping her hidden, already irrationally planning ahead on how he would make him pay. But right now, he wanted to enjoy their short time as much as possible. He dreaded looking down at his watch, so he didn't. He was even tempted to take it off and hide it away, but he didn't do that either.

When the silence was broken, it was Eleven pointing to the ghost trap she had kept her candy in. "Give Dustin his box back for me." She said, smiling fondly.

Mike remembered the looks that Lucas and Dustin had given him when they all definitely started to notice how familiar Eleven was with that costume. Man, were they going to freak out when he tells them... "I will." He agreed enthusiastically, nodding his head. Then he hesitated. "Um... El?"

She looked to him. "Yes?"

"Can I tell Lucas, Dustin, and Will that you're okay? And that... You were the ghost?" He asked cautiously.

Eleven almost seemed to impulsively nod, excitement at the mention of her other friends gripping her for a moment before she pursed her lips, frowning with thought. She looked conflicted for some time, before she finally came to a decision, her eyes flashing a glint of what he finally figured out was *rebellion*. "Yes. But keep it a secret only for you, and them."

Mike grinned. "O-okay, we will!" He replied. He would definitely break the news in the AV Room as soon as possible. The exchanged excited smiles.

"Tell Dustin and Lucas I missed them. And... Tell Will hi." Eleven instructed.

Mike nodded eagerly. "Yeah!"

Eleven paused in thought as she ate a Three Musketeers bar, her eyes glinting with curiosity. "Is..." Her eyes went up as she thought before she looked back to him. "Max?" She recalled the name, scanning his expression to make sure she remembered it correctly. He nodded, and then she continued on. "Friend from school?" She asked him.

Mike smiled guiltily. She seemed to really like Max, which ebbed at his conscious even more for disliking the red-haired girl's presence with the group so much. But he had his reasons, even so... Right? "Oh. I guess." He answered, looking away and shifting uncomfortably. "I mean, she's new at our school, and we haven't known her that long, so I don't know if she's our *friend*. I mean..."

Eleven's forehead crinkled as her eyebrows rose, like they often did when she was trying to figure out what he was trying to say.

"Dustin and Lucas just want her to be in the party because she plays video games, and they like her, or whatever, but... I dunno." Mike added, ending his sentence rather feebly, his list of reasons for his slight grudge sounding kind of stupid now that he was voicing them. Especially because didn't even know where he stood with his opinion on Max after this night's events. Now that he knew Eleven was alive, and that soon the whole party would know that too, the idea that Max could possibly replace Eleven in their group seemed more impossible to him.

"Oh." She responded, sounding both parts disappointed and still mildly confused. She sighed faintly, drawing his attention and concern. Geez, that reaction from her definitely brought him some guilt.

Max had been the one to really make Eleven fit back easily into the group before he knew for sure that it was Eleven under that white sheet. As far as everyone else thought at the time, she had been just as much of an outsider to the group as Max was. And, when he thought about it, Max must have been the first girl around her age that she had ever talked to.

At that thought, he was able to admit, "But she's pretty cool, I guess."

Eleven gave a slightly melancholy smile. "Yeah. Pretty cool." She

echoed in agreement.

Mike fell silent and looked down at his hands, which inevitably brought his eyes to his watch, even though he didn't want to look at it. 9:55. His mind irrationally searched for a possible way to stretch out five minutes to an infinity. But of course, it was in vain. His hands balled into fists. Their time was too short.

"El?" He asked, grabbing her attention, "Where are you staying?" He asked, and then he added in rapid-fire; "I won't tell anyone else, I promise, and I won't let anyone see me, but I want to be able to see you again-"

He had taken her hand, and she ruefully glanced down at the watch on his wrist. "You'll see me." She assured, looking determined. But she avoided answering his main question. She tightened her grip on his hand, huffing with frustration, before quietly adding, "...He kept saying 'soon'. And... He has rules."

Her nose crinkled at the mention of the word 'rules', but she held a level of respect for it nonetheless. She looked at Mike. "Can't let anyone inside except him." She explained.

Mike struggled to think of an argument for a moment. "Screw him!" He spat, "I- I wouldn't let anyone else know!"

Eleven nodded. "I know you wouldn't." She said, smiling slightly at him in a way that only amped up his adrenaline. She glanced away from him, hesitant for a moment, before seeming to once again be determined and somewhat rebellious against those *rules*. She frowned. "It's... in the woods..." She began, but then she fell silent as she thought and seemed to struggle to find more words.

"In the woods?" Mike pried, wide-eyed and heart thrumming as he hoped to dig out more information. Just that information alone had his mind running a mile-a-minute with possible places to look. He knew the woods pretty well. He could find her. He *would* find her.

Eleven shook her head slowly, still struggling to expound further. "I... I don't know how to describe it." She replied helplessly, frowning in frustration and disappointment.

"-That's okay, El!" Mike reassured her, feeling excitement at the possibilities rushing through him. "I'll find you."

Eleven had half of a wide smile on her face, her other hand that wasn't being held reaching up to touch the side of his face, and the contact was exhilarating. He couldn't suppress a grin.

"Don't let anyone see you." She instructed, studying his face intently.

He swallowed, trying to ignore how warm he felt. "I won't."

"Can't stay past 6:00. And you have to do a special knock so I know it's you."

Mike nodded, and she leaned toward the table their candy was spread out on and demonstrated the knock for him. He repeated it over and over in his mind to memorize it. "Okay."

He heard his mom calling him and telling him it was time for bed somewhere deeper from the upper level of the house. "OKAY!" He shouted in return, shooting up from his seat. He hurriedly took his bag he used for candy and started shoveling candy back inside of it, glancing up at Eleven. "You can take this back with you." He said.

Eleven stood up and put a hand on his arm to stop him. "That's your's," She said, then she pointed out the rather large pockets she had in her overalls. "I can use these."

He hesitated. "Are... Are you sure? I- I don't really mind."

"I'm sure." She assured him, before proceeding to carefully pick out her favorites and pocket them away. Mostly the Hershey's and Reese's chocolates. Mike couldn't help but smile a little, having learned some new favorites of her's. Even if they already were a rather popular choice, it was still fascinating to discover what she liked. They were immediately seared into his memory as her favorites without him consciously trying.

She settled with a relatively small amount compared to what was on the table. Sure, she had actually collected far less candy than he had because of the sheer size difference between his bag and her box, but that wasn't going to stop him from offering, "You can take more. You

can take all you want."

Eleven shook her head, though. And then they smiled at each other in silence, rocking ever-so-slightly on their feet, neither entirely sure of what to say, even though both of them looked as though they wanted to say something, while simultaneously looking to the other somewhat expectantly.

But when nothing happened for a time, she started to shift toward to couch to reach for her ghost costume - a movement that probably lasted no longer than a second in reality, but it lasted far longer to Mike as an impulse came over him and he flinched toward her slightly. "El?" He blurted out, stopping her mid-reach for the white sheet.

"Yes?" She replied back in record-time, almost instantly after he had spoken.

He felt his breath hitch in his throat. He panicked briefly and tried to think of something to say, but he hadn't really planned on saying anything.

His stomach felt like it performed a cartwheel as he quickly lurched forward and kissed her.

Déjà vu hit him again as he pulled back to see her reaction, the thrill of the kiss still coursing through him. She was smiling widely, exhaling a shaky, excited breath. The smile was contagious. She took his hand in her's and leaned up to give him a kiss in return before they just stopped to linger close to each other, taking in the warmth and brilliant static within the small gap between them.

Mike wished they could have stayed like that for much longer, but she regretfully slipped back to pick her costume up off the couch, and he knew that he needed to get to bed before his mom came and gave him a lecture.

And like that, with candy stuffed in Eleven's pockets to the brim, and her ghostly sheet brought back over her head, Mike followed her to the door before she paused once more to look at him, and he looked deeply into those eyes right back.

"Bye, Mike."

"Bye, El."

And then he ruefully watched as the white figure slipped off into the night in strides. She vanished from his line of eyesight almost as quickly as she had first suddenly appeared, standing in the woods between neighborhoods. He suddenly wondered if that section of the woods lead to where she was hidden away. Impulsively, he almost called out for her to ask, but he realized that she was already gone, and he didn't want to draw the attention of his family by shouting out the door. He reminded himself that it didn't matter, because he *would* find her.

After getting ready for bed, Mike considered just going straight up to his room. But he couldn't help but feel still guilty after his brief interaction with his mother.

Karen had settled downstairs with a book in a seat in the living room while Ted snored in his Lay-Z-Boy with the TV on. It was probably the closest to quality time his parents seemed to ever have with each other. Mike slowly approached the side of the chair she sat at, feeling unsure of what to say and how to express his faint gratitude that she actually let him stay up later.

She glanced up from her romance novel, asking what he needed just with her expression alone.

"Um. Goodnight, Mom." Mike said, stilted and awkward. Even though he fully intended to express some light warmth toward her, he already felt the wish to flee from the situation. But he sucked up this tugging feeling as he held out his hand and offered her several pieces of Hershey's Special Dark chocolate.

"There's more. I'll give you the rest tomorrow, like I said." He said informatively.

Karen's face lit up, making him feel both guilty but embarrassed. She took the candies and proceeded to pop one of the small chocolates into her mouth after she quickly unwrapped it. "Mm, delicious! You

really ought to give them a try again!" She gushed, giving him warm, grateful, overly-motherly eyes that he felt the urge to avoid looking at.

Mike snorted. "No." He replied, already slinking backwards.

She shrugged and shot him a playful smile. "You're missing out." She chimed.

"Whatever." He mumbled, wishing she wasn't so friendly for some reason.

"Well, more for me, then." Karen sighed jokingly, then she raised her eyebrows at him and looked somewhat serious, but still... *gushy*. "It's good to see that there's still some of that same sweet little boy left in you."

Mike's nose crinkled and he frowned, his shoulders shrugging up. Gross. "...I guess."

Karen laughed. "I'm sorry." She corrected, "Little *man*."

Mike groaned. Somehow, that was way worse. He was out of there before she could get any more affectionate, but he could hear her laughing still and saying something. But he didn't think he could stand it any more. Why couldn't she just be normal?

Eleven traipsed her way back to where she thought she came from, following something of an inner homing device for the cabin. She always knew how to find things, instinctively, even though she had trouble describing it. Hopper was back at the cabin by now, and he wasn't going to be happy when she got back. She knew it. She broke all the rules.

But she was right - nobody could tell the difference between her and someone normal. Not this night. Everyone had costumes, like her. No bad men found her.

The success of her escapade only convinced her more that Hopper was being unfair. And it fed into her growing defiance that she felt against him - something that had been growing slowly every day, but

now it had expanded to max capacity over this one day.

Nobody saw her. And yet he wanted to keep her inside. He wanted to keep her from her friends. From Mike.

She thought about the way Mike's face lit up when she said his name, and when he saw her without her ghost costume. She thought about the way he had hugged her and cried because he had missed her. She thought about every night she watched him call her, and how much she wanted to hold him the way she had this night.

She thought about each of her friends, old and new, being nice to her even though they didn't know who she was, because they were good.

She thought about the night she was separated from her friends, when Papa told her he would take her back to the lab, to make her feel *better*, while keeping her away from the ones who actually cared about her.

Then she thought about Hopper telling her she couldn't go Trick-Or-Treating.

These thoughts stewed over and over in her mind, while she was still running high from her time with Mike, and the thoughts kept coming to the same conclusion in her head: *Hopper is like Papa*.

The cabin was coming in sight before a large hand suddenly fell on her shoulder, pulling her to face the tall figure rather roughly. It was Hopper. His expression said it all. He looked like he couldn't even think of where to begin with a reprimand.

"I've been looking all over for you. For hours." He finally growled.

He hurriedly pushed her along to the door of the cabin, as if she needed any help, and quietly shut the door behind them when they were inside while she threw off her costume. It looked so small now, in comparison to the intoxicating freedom she had indulged in for those few hours. Eleven started to make a beeline for her room.

"Hey, HEY! I'm not done talking to you!" Hopper said warningly.

Eleven stopped and stiffened. She really didn't want to talk. Slowly,

she turned to face him, and she stared him defiantly in the eye.

They stared at each other, tension building to a frightening climax in the air.

"No one saw me."